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SUBJECT: Tour D' Horizon with Vice Minister of Public Security

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CLASSIFIED BY: Virginia Palmer, DCM, DEPT OF STATE, EXEC; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Over dinner with the Ambassador February 8, powerful vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong expressed serious concern about the success of China's "soft power" campaign to increase its influence in the region and challenged the U.S. commitment to Asia, saying ASEAN nations had "lost trust" in the U.S. after years of neglect. Huong was characteristically strident about human rights issues. Nonetheless, Huong asserted that "Vietnam wants to be closer to the United States," the most senior confirmation we have heard of what we sense is the beginning of a political decision to commit to a deepening of the bilateral relationship. End Summary.

WE WANT TO BE CLOSER TO YOU

¶2. (C) After over a year of ignoring requests for meetings, Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong, accompanied by General Department of Security (GDS) Deputy Director General To Lam, invited the Ambassador and the Ambassador's Senior Advisor to dinner February 8. Throughout the two-hour meal, Huong pointed to China's increasing influence in SE Asia, saying China's no-strings attached business deals had resulted in the virtual colonization of Burma, Laos, Thailand and increasingly Cambodia. The United States was "behind" in diplomatic and economic engagement in Asia and many countries in the region had "lost trust in the U.S.;" China was filling that vacuum. Huong claimed that only Vietnam is resisting this trend, but, he acknowledged, Vietnam is careful not to antagonize China. Huong seemed to take on board the Ambassador's comments about greater U.S. engagement with ASEAN, but was clearly interested in assessing the United States' willingness to balance China's influence in the region.

¶3. (C) Huong said international engagement used to be regarded as important only in so far as it promoted social (and Communist Party) stability, but it is playing a bigger role. Cooperation with the United States had played an important role in that shift, Huong said. "We want to build cooperation with the United States at all levels, including in counter-terrorism, counter-proliferation and exchanging high level visits Huong professed. He cited three Deputy Prime Minister visits to the U.S. in 2009, MPS Minister Ahn's desire to visit the U.S. again in 2010 and satisfaction with warming military to military ties. (Comment: Although there are Politburo members who argue for closer ties with either Russia or China, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of National Defense and now Public Security, we are sensing a desire to improve relations with the United States, in part because of the economic benefits of the bilateral relationship, but primarily as a means of balancing China's increasingly assertive regional role. We hope that trend will be confirmed at the 2011 Party Congress, but there will fierce, though largely subterranean, debate over the issue within the Party and government on the issue over the next year. End Comment.)

PREDICTABLE HARD LINE ON HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES

14. (C) Huong was dismissive of U.S. concerns about human rights. When the Ambassador raised the case of Le Cong Dinh, for example, Huong waved his hand and said "I will not listen. He is a Vietnamese citizen." Houng protested Western statements criticizing the string of recent convictions, calling it "interference in Vietnam's internal affairs. I ask that you do not write these letters or make such statements." When the Ambassador raised concerns about the deteriorating health of Father (Nguyen Van Ly), Huong claimed (disingenuously) not to know of it, but said derisively "I can tell you that he will be treated by the relevant authorities. I have no further information on the so-called Father Ly." The Ambassador noted that despite our enthusiasm for strengthened bilateral relations, Vietnam's poor human rights record limited our ability to move forward in many areas.

BIO NOTES

15. (C) Huong's imminent retirement has been rumored for at least 9 months. However, Huong suggested to the Ambassador that no matter what his official title at the Ministry, he would maintain his role as a Party Central Committee member and could take up an "Executive Vice Minister" role. Huong's analysis of U.S. political actors and "anti-Vietnamese forces" reveals a poor understanding of the U.S. system and just plain bad analysis. He also acknowledged that he had previously understood the Ambassador to be dealing only with issues like human rights and had failed to understand the role of the Ambassador as the President's representative and manager of all aspects of U.S. national power in country, including intelligence

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and defense.

16. (C) Just before the dinner, MPS officials revealed that frequent Embassy interlocutor GDS Deputy Director General To Lam would soon fill the recently-vacated GSD Director slot and would be promoted to Lt. General later in 2010. Lam is a hardliner himself, but smart and interested in increasing cooperation with the United States on a number of fronts.
Palmer